



# Life Course of Youth Gang Members

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## **Executive Summary**

This study examined the life histories of 16 gang-involved young men and youth from the Ottawa area using in-depth interviews. The focus of the project was the institutional supports provided to youth and whether youth were receiving supports. Institutional support included schools, recreation, spiritual/religious support, and health and mental health. We also considered parenting and community factors. The research also looked at the structure and roles in gangs, how youth entered gangs and the benefits and challenges of being gang involved. Overall, youth received considerable support but despite this were not protected from becoming gang involved.

Schools were key sites for support and integration and they were also places where youth acted out. Schools employed a range of responses to youth who had school-based problems. All schools responded to the problematic behaviours but were less effective in addressing the underlying causes. About half the participants were referred for assessment of learning disabilities and for mental health problems and half were not. One key area where support seemed to be lacking was mental health support. Here we found that immigrant youth do not seem to have been screened for exposure to trauma and thus no plans were made to address these traumas. But, we also found cultural resistance to seeking mental health care and to accepting mental health diagnoses. The initial lack of assessments, in turn, impacted on their integration into Canadian society and, in particular, to their involvement in the educational system. Schools assessed some individuals but not others. It is not clear why this occurs and this requires further investigation.

Youth had access to recreation and most participated – all at school and about half in the community. Access in the community was limited by resources, by knowledge about programs and opportunities, and by challenges for working parents (most of whom did not have cars) to get youth to programs. Youth 'time out' of recreation programs around age 14 or 15 which is the same age at which they are becoming actively gang involved.

Most youth had involvement with religious institutions in that they attended services. But, full involvement was impacted by access factors – youth often had no means of getting to services unless they were taken by an adult – and by a disconnect between the challenges of their daily lives and the issues that their various faith groups addressed. Most began to drift away from attending services in their early teens.

Parenting was raised by participants as a major challenge. Specifically, the youth felt that their parents had expectations that teachers and other adults in the community would be working with them to supervise young people. But, this did not happen and, as a result, they were not made aware of the problems youth were facing or the risks they were exposed to. For example, one specific risk was that all participants report hanging out with gang-involved youth in the neighbourhood on the sports fields and being exposed to violence and drug dealing. They felt that in their countries of origin their parents would have been warned by others and here they were not. This made it easy to hide what was going on from parents. They say the Canadian approach of individualising responsibility for children was in conflict with a model where responsibility is more community-based. To address this they recommended educating parents about the system. In addition, they felt parents would benefit from information on the warning signs of drug and alcohol use and of gang involvement. For youth themselves, an issue that they felt needed to be addressed was hostility in the wider community to youth who are immigrants or marginal to society and bullying (teasing) at school. Efforts need to be made to increase awareness of cultural differences especially around issues of respect. These misunderstandings contribute to conflict in the schools and the community and to immigrant youth getting into trouble.

Communities also mattered. While all communities have some resources, there were few resources for older youth. This is likely to be challenging since this is an age where youth are anxious to be doing less structured activities and in developing their own competencies in less structured surroundings. Communities are also where youth came into close contact with drugs, drug dealers, and gangs. This has to be addressed. If only by letting youth and parents know the problems and risks.

Poverty was a critical factor in youth becoming gang involved. Most were poor and sought money for subsistence, to help out their families, and, most commonly, so they could have goods that others had. This included cars, electronics, nice clothes and access to social activities. It is difficult to know how to address these factors. Parents generally worked, but at low-skilled, low-paying jobs. This is a challenge for immigrant families nationwide. Youth reported that it was difficult to get a job if you came from their neighbourhoods. But, most were gang-involved and dealing drugs before they were of legal working age.

Youth involved in gangs were courted and groomed by older men who were already gang involved. These men offered our participants money, drugs, favours, and support in conflicts. They drove expensive cars and had other visible signs of wealth and status that made them the envy of participants.

Involvement was gradual from casual dealing to more involved participation. Youth sought wealth, status, and safety that gangs offered but gave little consideration to the negative consequences. Getting arrested was viewed as a rite of passage, another measure of your status – that you were a 'bad guy'.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper presents the results of a study that examined the life histories of gang-involved youth in the Ottawa area. It examines the institutional supports that gang-involved youth needed as they grew up and whether these supports were available and accessed. It also considers what might have helped to keep them from becoming gang involved. The context for the current study is the recognition of two important facts. First, that considerable research exists that suggests that the process whereby youth become gang involved is shaped by individual, familial, community, and structural-level factors. Second, that despite our recognition that gang involvement is complex, much of the existing research on youth gang involvement is primarily concerned with individual-level variables such as the characteristics of gang involved youth and the challenges they experience exiting gangs. While these are an important component of gang involvement, it is equally important to consider the institutional supports available to youth and whether these play a role in gang involvement.

There are three general types of organized groups: 'youth gangs', 'street gangs' and 'organized crime groups'. As this study focuses on youth, two types of gangs are of interest: youth gangs and street gangs. Street gangs usually consist of young adults (18 – 30) and some adolescents who have been recruited by the older street gang members to carry out various criminal activities such as carrying or selling drugs. Street gangs are primarily organized to engage in criminal activity and they are often associated with organized crime groups (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Kelly and Caputo, 2005). In contrast, youth gangs include groups of young people who come together in a community or neighbourhood around issues related to status, identity, protection, and power. And while they may engage in criminal activities, this is not their primary purpose (Mathews, 1993). Youth who are members of youth gangs may be connected to street gangs but they are marginal to the street gang structure.

Differentiating between youth gangs and street gangs is important because it has implications for how we perceive and respond to the groups of young people in our communities. It also better reflects how youth understand their

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own activities. While differentiation is important it is also challenging. For example, groups of young people “hanging out” at neighbourhood basketball court or at some other gathering place may raise public and police concerns that they are members of a “gang”; whether they actually are a gang is difficult to ascertain. To establish that they are operating as a gang requires establishing both that they are involved in criminal behaviour and that their criminal activities are **organized group** events. Youth gang members use this grey zone of definition to deny that they are involved in a gang. They insist that they are “just a group of friends, people who grew up together and who hang out together”. With little hierarchy in such groups and rather fluid membership, it is often difficult to establish the membership of youth gangs and how they organise their illegal activities. Street gangs are easier to identify and define because they have criminal activity as the purpose for which they come together. They are also more structured. They are more likely to have an initiation process, to have a command hierarchy, and to require strict loyalty from members. Breaches of this loyalty can result in serious violence and may make it more difficult for members to leave gang life. In addition, street gangs are generally less visible than youth gangs because drawing attention to themselves gets in the way of ‘doing business’. When both types of gangs exist in a community, street gangs may use youth gang members to sell drugs and to insulate themselves from intervention by law enforcement and other agencies.

## Definitions

There is no widely accepted definition of a gang (Mathews, 1993; Weiler et al., 1994; Finn-Aage et al., 2001; Kelly and Caputo, 2005; Wortley and Tanner, 2007). For this study, we used a definition of a gang developed by the Ottawa Police:

A [gang is a] self-formed group of youths and/or adults interacting with each other who engage in a range of criminal behaviour. It may be loosely [organized] or well organized with established rules of conduct

As noted above, the features of youth and street gangs make it challenging to identify groups as gangs and youth as gang involved. However, youth serving agencies and law enforcement officials have begun to develop criteria for establishing both the presence of gangs and gang membership. The Ottawa police use the following definition of a gang member, which was also used in this study:

### Definition of a gang member:

Individual who meets 3 of the below 6 criteria (**NOTE: Criteria #4 must be one of those**):

- #1 – Reliable information that a person is a gang member
- #2 – Police officer observes person associating with known gang member(s)
- #3 – Person acknowledges gang membership
- **#4 – Person is involved directly or indirectly in a gang motivated crime**
- #5 – Court finds the person to be a gang member
- #6 – Person [is] found to be displaying common or symbolic gang identification or paraphernalia (street-name, tattoos, colors,)

## **Responding to Street and Youth Gangs**

Responding to street and youth gangs requires a broad continuum ranging from prevention and intervention at one end to law enforcement and interdiction at the other. The resources that are directed at prevention and intervention are diverse. They include education and awareness programs aimed at changing individual perceptions and behaviour and social supports to address health, mental health, educational, and economic challenges. But, in most communities, the limited resources available for direct gang-related interventions are typically directed at enforcement (Totten, 2009). There is considerable evidence that prevention activities are also a key part of the programming and that the responses of a range of groups and institutions contribute to healthy outcomes for youth including:

- School programs aimed at supporting academic engagement and academic success; including but not limited to: language acquisition courses, assessments and support for youth with learning and developmental disabilities, recreational activities (teams and clubs), and support programs such as homework clubs and peer mentors.
- Health and mental health programs including, early diagnosis and assessment of health and mental health issues, availability of care, and high quality of care.
- Family supports including counselling, interventions where youth and children are being abused or neglected, and transition programs for immigrant youth and their families.
- Recreational activities including providing pro-social alternatives for youth that assist in keeping them away from crime-involved older youth and adults, that assist in building self-esteem and provide skills, contacts and experience that can assist youth in getting jobs.

- Spiritual and religious programs that provide youth with moral codes that support pro-social lives, build self-esteem, and provide youth with a sense of belonging and community.

This research examined the role of these institutional supports in the lives of young men who are gang involved.

## **A Life Course Approach**

One of the key challenges in understanding and responding to youth crime generally and gang involvement more specifically is that how (and when) youth become gang involved is neither a uniform nor a simple process. There are multiple pathways to gang involvement. Young people experience a range of events over their life course that contribute to their involvement in antisocial behaviour generally and gangs, in particular. There are a range of factors that increase the risk that young people will engage in anti-social behaviour and become youth or street gang involved. These risk factors work together in complex ways and can be mitigated by positive or protective factors. The exact combination of risk and protective factors varies. Institutional supports (schools, health care, mental health, recreation, spiritual institutions) attempt to strengthen protective factors or redress the impact of risks. As such they are critical activities in helping youth stay out of gangs. That said, it is important to recognize that there are multiple structural factors that increase risk which institutions may not be able to address or to redress. For example, cultural resistance to seeking mental health support for young people may mean that despite available resources youth do not receive the support they need.

In addition to considering the impact of factors at a variety of levels, the life course approach also argues that the factors that shape youth involvement in crime change over the life course. Thus, a life course approach argues that children who exhibit anti-social behaviour during the preschool year have different patterns of risk and resilience than young people who initiate criminal activity at older ages. In particular, familial risk factors and structural adversity are particularly important for the preschool group and school factors and low attachment to schools become increasingly important as children grow older. These risk and protective factors operate at different levels (structural, community, familial, and individual) and across the age span. They combine in complex ways to impact on life course trajectories.

Institutional supports are linked to youth gangs and to prevention through the services they provide to youth at risk, youth who are gang-involved, and youth exiting gangs. They do this, primarily, by mitigating the risks factors related to

youth becoming gang involved. Key risk factors include poverty, social exclusion, racism, dysfunctional families, exposure to violence, and addictions. While risk factors are identified as single items they actually combine to re-enforce or mitigate impacts. For example, poverty is often related to mental health problems such as depression which, in turn, can contribute to drug and alcohol addiction. Poverty is also related to social exclusion which contributes to a lack of economic opportunities and often limits access to legitimate jobs. But poverty also impacts youth differently across the life course. When children are younger, poverty affects the ability of families to provide support and to monitor young people (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Kroes, 2008; NCPC, 2007; PSC, 2006; Sirpal, 2002; Whitbeck, 2002,).

As young people grow up, the lack of viable economic opportunities impacts them more directly. In particular, they find that conventional means of making money and of having social status are blocked from them. This makes them especially susceptible to recruitment by street gangs and involvement in youth gang related crimes because they offer young people access to both money and status (Campbell, 2005; Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Grekul and LaBoucane-Beson, 2008; Hailer, 2008; Kelly and Caputo, 2005; Kerr and Marion, 2003; Stinchcomb, 2002; Theriot and Parker, 2007). Indeed, the lack of viable economic opportunities for many youth makes them especially susceptible to recruitment by highly organized street gangs since the gangs offer access to money and power that are not available to these young people through conventional means (Campbell, 2005; Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Grekul and LaBoucane-Beson, 2008; Hailer, 2008; Kelly and Caputo, 2005; Kerr and Marion, 2003; Stinchcomb, 2002; Theriot and Parker, 2007).

Immigrant youth have particular risk and protective factors. Recent research on immigrant and refugee families finds that parents experience challenges with respect to how to discipline young people in a new cultural context (Farver et al. 2007; Herz and Gullone 1999; Lewig, Arney, and Salveron 2010; Perreira, Chapman, and Stein 2006; Renzaho, McCabe and Sainsbury 2011; Tajima and Harachi 2010). For example, for some immigrant communities were used to support from extended families members and indeed the wider community in disciplining and raising their children (Lewig et al. 2010). They find in their new environments that these supports are absent – though they may assume that things are fine because no one is indicating that their children are not behaving in an acceptable manner. Another challenge is around the impact of the use of physical punishment. In countries where there is low normative support for physical punishment, young people who experience such punishment are more likely to experience anxiety and to be aggressive (Tajima and Harachi 2010). This **may** increase the problems that immigrant youth experience as they

attempt to integrate into their new countries and can increase the risk that youth will be vulnerable to gang involvement.

School-related variables also contribute to or mitigate the risk that youth will become gang involved (Spratt, Jenkins, and Doob 2005). Research indicates that challenges in accessing education (Grant and Feimer, 2007; Grekul and LaBoucane-Beson, 2008; Nafekh, 2002) and early school leaving are significant risk factors for youth criminality. As a recent Canadian Council on Learning (2009) report notes,

The relationship between education and crime is most obvious when considering rates of incarceration. Some researchers suggest that education is the second best predictor of incarceration (the best predictor is whether a person has been in jail previously). High school leavers are disproportionately represented among prison populations.

For many immigrant youth and their parents, schools are challenging settings. Language, work, and cultural barriers may weaken the connection of parents to the education system. This can result in their being unable to monitor the challenges youth face at school. In the Ottawa context, the issue of 'zero tolerance' for fighting at school has been raised as a particular challenge for immigrant youth whose cultural and personal backgrounds have encouraged the use of violence to settle scores who find themselves suddenly in a context where violence is not only not acceptable but where they are expected to immediately cease such behaviour with minimal support. In addition to cultural barriers, many immigrant youth also face language barriers that make school challenging. Further, their academic background prior to coming to Canada may have been scattered or even non-existent which is a further challenge to academic success. As a result, for many immigrant youth, school can be a threatening, foreign place where they experience frustration and on-going academic challenges. In turn, poor academic performance can contribute to a low attachment to school (Ferguson and Wormith, 2005; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Hailer, 2008, Kroes, 2008; National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC), 2007) a key risk factor for dropping out.

Youth may also have a number of other challenges that weakens their attachment to schools. Students with learning disabilities find school particularly difficult and when such conditions go undiagnosed or untreated are at greater risk of increased conflict at school, higher rates of school failure and higher risk of dropping out.

Social and recreational programs for youth are key factors in keeping youth away from substance abuse and crime (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Whitbeck, 2002;). Indeed, some studies have reported that youth joined gangs because of boredom (Hailer, 2008). Thus, providing youth with access to appropriate recreational opportunities is another important factor in reducing the risk that young people will become gang involved. Here again there are challenges. Access to recreation may be costly and therefore challenging for youth from economically marginal families. Further, accessing recreation opportunities may also require parents to know what programs there are and to register their children. Language barriers and lack of knowledge may make this challenging for immigrant families.

Finally, issues related to how host societies welcome and integrate youth are also important in keeping youth out of crime and in their becoming crime involved. Freng and Esbensen (2007) considered how multiple marginalizations contribute to youth gang involvement. Their research indicates that discrimination is a key factor in marginalization and that it compounds the impact of factors like poverty, lack of economic opportunities, low social control, and language barriers on youth becoming crime involved. Youth may join gangs or develop into gangs as a protective response to immediate, local, physical threats or the more general threats of a hostile host community (Wortley and Tanner 2004).

## **Methodology**

Studying youth gangs is challenging from a design perspective because of the lack of an easily accessible list of gang members from which to sample potential interview participants. As a result, this study used a convenience sample of gang-involved young men. Potential participants were identified by the police, correctional staff and by staff at school. Youth who fit the definition of gang members were then approach by correctional staff or staff at school and asked if they would be interested in participating in the study. Only two people declined to participate. In total, eighteen interviews were conducted. Sixteen young men were from the Ottawa area and their life histories form the core of the analysis. The two remaining young men were from Montreal and Toronto and their information provided points of contrast – highlighting differences in the gang situation in Ottawa compared to Toronto and Montreal where street gangs are more firmly established. Most (16 of 18 interviewees) were in custody during the interview period and two were not. Sixteen of the eighteen interviewees were gang-involved in the Ottawa area. The remaining 16 interviews represent about 5% of youth who are gang involved in the Ottawa area.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 18 participants. Each interview was a life history beginning from where they were born to their current charges and living situations. While all participants were asked about their experiences growing up in their families, at school, in their neighbourhoods, about their health and mental health histories, their contact with social services, about recreation, and about their spiritual/religious life, we did not necessarily ask these in a fixed order. Rather we allowed participants to talk about issues as they came to mind and then ensured using a question check list that all key institutional supports had been discussed. We also asked youth about their involvement with gangs, how they conceived of this, and their involvement in criminal activities.

Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were told about the purpose of the study and asked to review a consent form. Interviewees were also asked to give permission for the interviews to be taped. Participants in adult custody were not paid for their participation. Two participants who were in young offender facilities were paid with gift cards and two participants who were in the community were paid in cash. Some of the adult participants who were in adult custody requested and were provided letters to immigration courts on their participation in the study. Participants chose or were given pseudonyms and no identifying information will be included in this report. All participants were provided with the name and contact information of counselling support within the institution (for those in custody) or at a local youth serving agency (for those in the community) should they feel distressed as a result of the issues discussed in the interviews.

## **Findings**

### **Sample Profile**

Participants were primarily youth gang members. They had connections to street gangs but worked primarily as street-level dealers. The youth gangs themselves fit the description in the literature of a loose connection of peers who come together for protection, recreation and become involved in crime. Some were more deeply involved or were seeking to move up the hierarchy and were seeking to become or had become street gang members. Four participants Random#1, Rogi, Jay, and Ali (#18, #5, #2, #1) seemed to fit the profile of being street gang members. However, only two admitted to being gang involved Rogi and Random#1 and only Random#1 reporting have undergone initiation into gang life.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 yrs with an average age of 23.5. The age range covers the period in which youth gangs emerged as an important

presence in the community up to the current period. The young men were from a variety of backgrounds. Most were immigrants to Canada (13 of 16) and they emigrated from a wide range of countries: the Congo, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Somalia, and the Ukraine.

Most of the participants (ten of 16) were the oldest children in their families. It is interesting that so many were older children and it is an issue that might be important for further investigation. This may reflect that they came at an older age and had more transition problems or it could be that they were the first to have contact with negative groups and gangs and acted to insulate or protect their younger siblings from becoming involved.

Participants had extensive criminal records for a range of crimes including shoplifting, assault, robbery, break and enter, joy riding/car theft, drug dealing, forcible confinement, domestic assault, weapons offences, and numerous breaches of probation and other conditions of release. Two were youth and so had only young offender records. Nine had both youth and adult records and four had only adult records. One participant reported having no criminal record at all. Their arrest records began as early as age 13 and as late as 24. Fourteen of the participants were in custody at the time of the interviews and two were in the community. For those in custody, some were serving sentence for crimes that had been adjudicated or to which they had pled guilty, some were awaiting court dates, and some were on immigration holds for consideration for deportation.

The data analysis considers a number of issues. The first is how youth became gang-involved. Then we consider the role that institutions played in the lives of youth. Finally, we discuss parenting and neighbourhoods.

### ***Process of Getting Gang Involved***

While all these young men were exposed to gangs in their neighbourhoods or through other connections, the process of becoming gang-involved is not straight forward. Youth transitioned into gangs in a variety of ways. One key way youth became involved was through fighting and their connections to other youth. Another was through the support and 'nurturing' of contacts the gang members developed between themselves and these young people. They also transitioned in as a means of getting things they wanted, surviving, and helping their families.

### ***Fighting, Friends and Fitting In***

Fighting at school and in the community was a common theme in the lives of these young men. The interviews explored what they thought led them to fight. There were, not surprisingly, a variety of answers. However, a common thread in



these answers was a perspective on fighting that viewed it as an essential, indeed an ordinary part of the development of status, connections, and relationships. With respect to status, fighting focused around issues of respect, reputation, and feeling disrespected. Twelve of the 16 respondents reported fighting for one or more of these reasons. Respondent #12 described his experience with fighting at school:

In \*\*\*\*\* it is was pretty rough, tough and at school I used to get into fights – almost every day there was some kind of test to see if you were tough enough. People were beating each other up and you had to fight. (Participant #12)

Participant #11 had a similar experience:

I got into a couple of fights at school with guys from outside \*\*\*\*\* – I was known and respected in \*\*\*\*\* but other guys from other neighbourhoods did not really know me - they were trying to figure out who you were and people challenged me.  
(Participant #11)

Participants reported that they fought with people in their neighbourhood who ultimately became their friends. Fighting was a test it seemed. As T put it: “It you don't stand up for yourself, if you do nothing then you're a wuss.” Rogi (participant #5) found that “... a little bit of violence and everyone was your friend.” He did whatever it took to be cool and that included fighting. He was also a bully and for a period did some protecting of others which also garnered him friends. Ali (participant #1) felt that he had “... got stuck in this neighbourhood with these people and you had to deal. You had to fight, there was no option of backing down – you built a rep and people didn't mess with you.” Jay (participant #2) liked being the bad guy and having people be afraid of him.

Four participants reported no use of fighting to build a reputation – though they did engage in violence with other youth (robberies, jumping people, and swarmings) and at times around drug deals. These four were interesting because three of them (D., Mo, and Abdul) were connected to other violent people. D and Mo had brothers who were deeply gang involved and Abdul said that his friends were bullies. These associations may have protected them from having to fight themselves. The fourth Ali2 had a different path – he was a loner and spent a lot of time playing video games so had few confrontations. He did have some friends and did engage in criminal activities with them – as both a follower and as an initiator. However, he was out of school and working from age 14 to 18 which he says kept him away from most of the violence. At 18

he had a crisis and became involved in dealing drugs. However, here he says he had associates and not friends.

In reflecting on fighting and the need that these young men expressed for being violent it is important to consider how their behaviour would be viewed by older men recruiting dealers. These were young men who could and would stand their ground. These may be traits that recruiters look for in these young men. Their desire to fit in and be connected to others, their strength and their ability to defend themselves would all be useful traits for street-level dealers. In addition, their connections to other young men would be useful for identifying other potential deals and possibly building a further buffer between upper level members and street-level dealing. We now turn to these issues beginning with the structure of gangs, the work that our participants were doing, and the processes that brought them into gang life.

### ***Joining and Leaving Gangs***

To understand how youth become gang involved and their level of involvement requires some sense of the structure of gangs. Gangs provide different points of entry for young men – some become part of more organised street gangs while others are part of youth gangs and have only tenuous connections to street gangs.

### **The Structure of Gangs**

The primary purpose of the street gang activity is 'doing business' and youth involvement with such gangs is structured around what you need to have, do, and be to get business done. Youth gangs in contrast, involve a variety of activities and crimes including dealing but also robbery, assaults, and break and enter crimes. Here the focus is on having each others' backs and criminal activity is only one dimension of their activities.

Street gangs with their higher level of organization are more structured and require members to prove loyalty. This may include an initiation process involving doing a particular crime or a physical test. Some also include tattoos and cutting marks on the arms or other body parts. For youth gangs, membership is more fluid. Youth become engaged in low level dealing typically through personal contacts and become the 'street' face of the gang. As they move up, young men can substantially increase their income but they also increase their involvement with the gangs. They also increase the risk that they will be in conflict with others for sales territory. Violence is used at all levels. At the street level, violence can be used to enforce drug debts or to hassle other street-level dealers. At the upper levels, resentment over others infringing on your territory or turf can also lead to violence. Violent confrontations lead, not surprisingly, to enemies. This is important because leaving a gang can be most

dangerous for young men who have enemies. Gang members are expected to have each others' backs' and this provides some level of protection from retaliatory attacks by rival gangs.

We need to consider the structure in greater depth. At the core of a youth gang, are the people who organise and run the gang. Ali2 spoke about this group in the Crips. He reported that they sought in 2006/7 to develop a small core of members – these were the real gang members. They sought to control the drug trade and had a large group of young men who were connected to the gang but not full fledged members. This was intended to keep them (core members) insulated from people ratting them out to the police and from arrest. Young men began at the lower levels and some sought to move up and enter these inner circles. They had to prove themselves and most did not actually make the cut. Instead, youth were able to expand their incomes by recruiting other young men to work for them and taking a cut of their sales. Most of our participants 12 of 16 were youth gang members who dealt drugs for street gangs or who worked as independent dealers and bought their supplies from street gangs. Below, we present the details of the levels of involvement in gangs based on the interviews:

1. When you begin to sell you're a **runner**. You may get brought into this by the older guys in the neighbourhood. These men slowly bring younger men into the life. They get to know youth in the neighbourhood and assess who they are. They may provide young men with drugs and with alcohol or have their backs if they are involved in a conflict. They are also highly visible and have cars, money, and material goods that many young men value and want to have themselves. They are "guys that people look up to and envy."
2. These contacts with young men is important for the older men because they are opportunities to recruit new runners. Runners provide increased income – expanding the number of clients and hence profits. These older men provide the young men with drugs – they are their connection. But, runners have to get their own customers. Respondents indicate that was pretty easy. They said that people came into their neighbourhoods and asked them for dope or coke or crack – that's common even before they began to deal. This included people in the neighbourhood and kids at school. Alternately, they described hanging out in places and asking people if they wanted to 'party'. Respondents indicated that they had seen dope dealt in their neighbourhoods and so knew before they began to work as runners how to deal drugs. They also learned from other runners. Simple rules such as get the money before you hand over the drugs so you don't get robbed. Some girls are involved in finding suppliers but not as runners. So, Kyle described it this way "Often girls like me and

the girls can find business for me. I give the girls free food, weed and alcohol – is very cheap way to get customers.”

3. At the next level you are a **reup** guy. If you want to increase your income you have to set up a runner system. You identify guys to be runners and you supply them with or have them get a cell phone. Reup guys may actually stake runners on their first deal. Jay (respondent #2) said that his supplier gave him his initial product which Jay sold and then he paid for the drugs once he had sold it. Jay noted that though the guy ‘trusted him’ to pay for the drugs, the risk was really limited because the guy knew where he lived and could get the money one way or the other. The phones are used to make arrangements to pick up drugs. Each of your runners has at least one phone, and each sells for you. In addition to supplying your runners with ‘product’, if they get into trouble they use their phone to call you and you use your phone to call your other runners – so they know you ‘have their back’. You make money from each runner you have. But, you don’t want runners you don’t know and trust. So you might have four friends and each of them has four friends and they all work together and they all pick up off of you. While, all the participants spoke about having runners you can trust and how important this was, they also indicated that one of the core problems was people ‘ratting each other out’. This is a big challenge for reups because you have to trust the people who work for you because you use these guys to insulate yourself.
4. The main supplier is the **connect**. The **reup** guy buys drugs from his connection. How you make this connection matters because it impacts on how you do business. If your **connection** supplies for your area and **he asks you** to pick up off him then if you switch you’re going to get roughed up. If **you just ask** some guy to supply you and he’s not controlling the area then you can switch. Connections look for people who can “talk good – someone that they can see people like him” because this is an important trait in building up a team of runners and a large client base.

There are others involved but for the street-level men we interviewed this was the highest level of involvement that they would admit to having or knowing about. So, we will not explore what happens at these upper levels.

### **Working on the Ground**

All our participants had worked as runners. They explained how things worked on the ground. For example, they noted that people began by attempting to build a customer base. Building a customer base may be a relatively straight forward process of being asked or offering drugs to people. However, there are many street-level dealers and your initial attempt to develop a customer base or your attempt to expand your customer base may mean you infringe on other

runners territories. In addition, some runners and some reup men try to take over a certain area and keep others out. This leads to violence. One respondent described doing this as being about being greedy – wanting to make more money (Ali – respondent #1). He thought it was not necessary because you could make pretty good money without doing this. Other respondents indicated that there were actually few fights in Ottawa related to 'turf wars'. Rather they said fights were personal 'beefs' between guys that did not like one another or they were fights over women. Indeed, while they indicated that there are many people dealing drugs they felt that for most there was no serious issues of turf.

So how much money were these young men making? Some respondents provided information on their incomes levels. Ali indicated that he made about \$20K per month as a reup guy – most of which he spent on gambling. On his first product Jay made \$2400 dollars (after paying his supplier) selling coke. He was using and used dealing as a mean to supply his habit. D. made between \$500 and \$1000 per day – he was supplying a string of runners. He was not using and was amassing considerable funds. He reported that when he was arrested the police found a kilo of cocaine in his house and \$20,000 in cash. Rogi also reported making good money from dealing – he began with weed but found the real profit was in coke. James reported making between \$2000 and \$4000 a week. He and D. were both reups and both faced the same problem – how to launder the money they made. They both indicated that the best way to do this was to buy businesses and then to launder their money through the business. The businesses they indicated they or others had used for this purpose included pizza businesses and barber shops. In addition, respondents bought cars that were listed as being owned by other people so could not be traced back to them and they also bought homes and listed the owner as girlfriends or other family members. This latter strategy was risky as they often lost the home if they broke up with their girl friend or if they were arrested. Respondents also stashed money and other things with friends.

To get some perspective on incomes consider the following report. You buy the drugs (weed for example) for between \$5 and \$15 per ½ ounce. They sell for between \$60 and \$120 per ½ ounce depending on the type of weed. Incomes can be really high depending on the how many runners you have – but you can easily earn \$9,000 a week [\$468,000.00 a year]. But, high incomes are a problem because you can't really use the money without drawing attention to yourself.

### **Getting Gang Involved**

All of the young men in the south communities were affiliated with the Ledbury-Banff Crips. Most of the participants from the west-end were affiliated with the Bloods. One exception was Rogi (participant #5) who admitted to being a Crip

– though he grew up in Blood territory. He says he joined the Crips because he “... hates Blacks and many of the Bloods were Black”. There was one participant #10 (Chase) who was involved in an emergent gang the Jugaloos and he became gang involved through people he met in care. This group is made up of white boys and young men who have been or are fleeing care.

Getting involved was a process. A key element were older men who recruited them as runners. These men were visible in the neighbourhood. They drove nice cars, had nice clothes, jewellery, money, and drugs. They were figures of envy and they courted the young men. They occasionally gave them money or bought them meals. From time to time they offered them drugs and they intervened in disputes and arguments. Jay talked about the money and he said “... Money might be the root of all evil it can also relieve a lot of pain.” Ali talked about being brought into dealing at age 15. He began to build his rep at 12 or 13. He and his friends wore blue bandanas and were cool. He began to deal – buying from a member of the crew and then selling on the street. The money he made was his own and he described money was his best friend. His transition to full involvement in the gang was gradual but it meant he had to be loyal to his crew – over his other friends and even over his brother. He lost girlfriends who were not happy about his gang involvement. He found he had no social life and was living ‘underground’ (meaning he had no ID, no license). He was asked to hold large quantities of drugs for others and his home became a ‘stash house’. His home was raided and he ‘took the rap’ for the drugs. When he got out his gang friends fronted him drugs so he could begin business again.

For D and Mo, their brothers brought them into contact with the gangs. Both were introduced to selling by their brothers. Mo was using and needed to sell to feed his habit. He was very aggressive and able to defend himself and he did well as a runner. D began dealing at age 22 through his gang involved younger brother. D. had ‘big ideas’ and he wanted to move beyond dealing small amounts of drugs to having people deal for them. They began to buy larger quantities. He also bought a flashy car – a Cadillac - which may have brought him to the attention of the police. His home was raided and he had a kilo of cocaine and \$20K in cash. He feels that the only way he got caught was that someone ‘ratted him out’.

Other participants joined gangs for protection in the neighbourhoods and to have a sense of belonging. There was no initiation and few requirements for this. Some wore colours and got tattoos. But, generally they became involved as street-level dealers and while they were aware of some gang members they were not privy to being part of the inner circle or to the processes involved in managing the movement of large amounts of drugs. Some were actually a problem for the gangs because their visible presence caught police attention

which was often unwanted. Being connected made people fear them and it also meant that they were required to have the backs of other crew members. Their involvement in gang activities also drew them out of their other connections coinciding with their leaving or being pushed from school and, for many, out of their parents homes. They felt safe however. They were respected and feared by others and had a sense of achievement. For most, the move deeper into gang life was gradual, while for others it was precipitated by negative events in their life including being 'kicked out by their parents' or having to leave home, the death of a parent, a parent losing a job.

### **Benefits and Consequences**

We asked respondents what they gained and what the negative consequences were of joining gangs. They provided a wide range of reasons:

Why Become Gang Involved?

- (a) Money (14 participants),
- (b) For Safety (6 participants),
- (c) As Sense of Belonging (6 participants),
- (d) Respect (5 participants),
- (e) To feel powerful (4 participants),
- (f) Drugs (4 participants), and
- (g) Excitement (3 participants)

Not surprisingly, given that all the participants lived in poverty, the most common motive was that this was a source of money. As noted above incomes were very high and they increased as participants moved from being runners to reup men. Only four participants reported using dealing to supply their drugs habits. This is not surprising since being high can put street-level dealers at risk for being sloppy and being arrested or exploited by others. But, respondents also became involved as a way of integrating into Canadian society and for safety – factors that were shaped by their communities and their feelings that they were not welcomed in Canadian society. For others the issue was status – being respected and feeling powerful – suggesting that they have few other means to achieve a sense of self worth.

The need for money, status, and to be safe and belong increased the risk that these young men would become gang involved. Addressing this issue is important to reducing gang involvement.

Participants listed a number of negative consequences to becoming involved. While being incarcerated was not seen positively it was seen as the price they had to pay for their activities. Other negative consequences included people

jumping and robbing you, having the police 'harass' them, having the police show up at their homes and bring shame to their parent(s) and families, having to take the rap for members of the crew, and people ratting each other out to the police. The latter was common and the two participants from outside the Ottawa areas (#6 from Montreal and #16 from Toronto) both commented on it. For both these participants, ratting out was uncommon in their home area. They said that in their home areas that there were severe consequences for ratting people out and that people would be beaten or perhaps even killed for doing so. Here they both noted, this was common and they argued that this reflected a lack of discipline among the ranks of street level dealers.

This lower level of structure, possibly a feature of the tight circle of key members, had some positive benefits since it made leaving the gang easier. There were pressures to stay. In particular, they found it difficult to make enough money at the legitimate jobs they could get to support themselves in the way they wanted to live. But, when they wanted to leave with little structure they could exit relatively easily. Some reported they could not do so because during the course of their careers they have made enemies and without being in the gang they would have no protection. But this was an uncommon concern.

### ***Institutional Supports***

As was noted above, one of the key factors that contribute to risk for gang involvement are pro-social connections and supports from social institutions. Youth that are engaged by pro-social institutions have a much lower risk of becoming gang involved. This section explores the experiences participants had with the educational, familial, recreational, and health services, and in their neighbourhoods.

### **Schools**

All 16 young men attended schools here in Ottawa. Four participants completed all their education in Canada – three were Canadian born, and one came to Canada at age two. The remaining fourteen participants came at a range of ages from 6 to 14 years of age. Some had school experience in their country of birth, others had been to school in other countries as refugees, and some came to Canada with no formal education at all.

While all these young men experienced challenges in their lives that impacted on their attachment to school, few were weak students. School achievement levels ranged with seven participants reporting being good students. Among these seven was one student who completed two years of University and one who received a medal for high achievement. A further four participants were average students and the remaining five were poor students. Despite differences in achievement, fourteen of the 16 participants experienced school-



based problems. As anticipated, the onset of school-based problems varied with some youth having problems in grade school and most experiencing problems in middle and high school.

*(a) School-based Problems*

School-based problems were common and 15 of the 16 participants quit or were expelled from high school. The behaviours that these young men exhibited at school were quite similar, though the onset varied and the sources of the problems were diverse. Common negative school-based problems included:

- Fighting (12 participants)
- Teased/Bullied (11 participants)
- Truancy or 'skipping' (9 participants)
- Defiant Attitude/Behaviour (6 participants)
- Drugs – using and/or dealing (5 participants)

Only two participants reported no school-based problems. The first one (participant #3) D. graduated high school and completed two years of University before becoming involved in drug dealing. The second was participant #8 (Abdul) reported no problems but said that he dropped out of school at age 14 when he came into conflict with the police.

While the problems were common, the onset and the extent of the problems at school were quite divergent. Of the 14 participants who reported coming into conflict with the school system six (Rogi, Chase, James, Mustafa, Barhoz, and Random#1) exhibited problems in grade school. All six were violent at school. Three of these participants were Canadian-born and exhibited school problems by grade one. Chase (participant #10) was born in Canada into an abusive family. He was taken into care at age 2 and then adopted at age 4 or 5. He had extensive problems at school including violence and learning problems. He struggled to learn and he assaulted anyone he felt was teasing him. James was acting out violently at school by age 6 and expelled from the regular school-system by age 11. He reported violence in the home between his Mother and her boyfriend and sometimes directed at him. His biological father had an anxiety disorder and James did as well. Random#1 was also in serious trouble by grade #1. His mother suffered from severe depression and she did not monitor what he and his siblings did. He was easily frustrated and acted out at school – he destroyed property – doing some \$1200 worth of damage. He assaulted other students including chasing another student with a brick and attempting to hit him in the head.

The remaining three participants had immigrated to Canada. Rogi (participant #5) was a bully. When he arrived in Canada he was nine years old and in grade 4. His violence was so severe that his family was evicted because of Rogi's assaults on other children in the neighbourhood. His behaviour at school was not much better and he was suspended his first year of school for assaulting other students. He had come from the Ukraine where he had witnessed considerable violence including a murder. He also came from a family that was extremely violent – one of the reasons for fleeing Canada was for to escape from his abusive father. Mustafa (participant #12) came to Canada from Somalia in grade 4 and exhibited problems immediately. He fought anyone who teased him. He did reduce his violence by grade 6, 7 and 8 but he did not stop being violent at school. He quit in grade 10. Barhoz (participant #14) also had problems at school beginning from when he first arrived in Canada from Iran. He was 11 when he began school in Canada. He also reported being teased and he reacted by stabbing one of his tormentors with a pencil. He got into trouble for this and for other fights as well. But, he also found that “everybody stopped bugging him” because of his violent behaviour. He also felt he got into trouble because he won the fights – he thought it made him look like the bad guy when, as he saw it, he was only standing up for himself. He also tried to protect his brother and was, in eighth grade, suspended for beating up a student who had slammed his brother head-first into a locker.

Of the remaining eight participants who reported problems at school, three were in trouble in middle school (grade 7 & 8). Participant #9 (Ali<sup>2</sup>) came to Canada from Saudi Arabia at age 12 and started in grade 6. He was in trouble by grade 7 or 8. He was being bullied (though he described it as being teased) and dealt with it by skipping school. He hid his truancy and when his parents found out he was beaten. The ‘teasing’ focused on his not being able to speak English and because he was poorly dressed compared to other students. By high school he was dealing drugs to make money – he was obtaining his drugs by robbing other students and then selling the drugs. He was violent and because he was stealing drugs from other students there were few complaints about his behaviour. He says he lost focus on school. Ali (participant #1) immigrated to Canada with his family from Lebanon. They fled the civil war. He was also in trouble by grade 7. He had been in schools in Canada since kindergarten. He reported loving school and had a good time at school. He had friends to hang out with and had fun. As he got older he began to get gang involved. His grades fell. He hid his grades from his parents by forging his report cards. Being in the gang made him cool – so he thought – and he also began to smoke ‘weed’. He lost focus and began skipping. Walid (participant #15) was born in Saudi Arabia. He and his family came to Canada because they could not have citizenship in Saudi Arabia. He lived in the east end of the city when he first came to Ottawa. He did well in school for his first couple of

years, mastering English, and winning an award for the best student of the month. In grade 8 he moved to the west end (\*\*\*\*\*) and then he began to fail at school. He was hyper and could not sit still. He had a conflict with his grade 8 teacher – he felt she did not want him in her class. He also began skipping school. He was eventually suspended though the school did allow him to graduate from grade 8.

Five participants reported that school-based problems emerged in high school. Modi's (participant #11) problems began in grade 9 the first year of school after he came to Canada from Pakistan. He had not attended school back home and was working towards being a mechanic. He had problems paying attention and acted out when provoked or teased by other students. T (participant #7) came to Canada from Kuwait and was in grade 8 for his first year at school. He had a successful first year. By grade 9 he was in high school and experiencing frustration because of failing due to language problems. He was in ESL but also taking regular classes. Participant #2 (Jay) came to Canada fleeing persecution after the fall of the Congolese government. He also experienced school failure in grade 9. In his case he failed two subjects and the school recommended that he take the classes again in summer school. But Jay's mother felt that he should repeat the full year – he was a year younger than most of his class mates. His mother insisted and he started grade 9 again the next fall. His new classmates knew him from middle school and Jay says he felt embarrassed and upset. He began to skip and felt detached from school.

Mo (participant #4) lived through considerable conflict during the civil war in Somalia. His early school experiences in Canada were positive and he did fine in grades 6, 7, and 8; he had good grades, attended regularly, though he did garner a couple of suspensions. By grade 9 or 10 he reported that he was losing focus. His father went out west for work and Mo found that without his father's disciplining presence he began to break the rules. He started hanging out with gang involved youth, smoking dope, and drinking. He also reported that he had been experiencing flashbacks and dreams related to his experiences in the civil war. He found the drugs helped with intrusive thoughts and feelings. Slowly his drug and alcohol use spiralled out of control and he stopped attending school.

Kolong (participant #17) came to Canada when his family fled the civil war in the Sudan when he was 5. He described the incident which triggered their leaving: His grandfather was out riding his horse and he was shot. Kolong saw him killed. The family immediately packed up and left the country. They were in Egypt for a time where he went to private school and then came to Canada. He initially did well in school. Things began to change in high school – he found

he was coming into conflict with teachers and began to not attend class. He did go to school but not to class. He was defiant and got into fights.

Two participants had no school-based problems: D (participant #3) came to Canada from the Congo and Abdul came from Somalia. D. successfully graduated high school and attended University. He dropped out because he could not pay his fees and was not eligible for OSAP because he did not have Canadian citizenship. He began dealing drugs. The second Abdul (participant #8) says everything was fine until grade 10. Then he came into conflict with the law – he says he was assaulted by a police officer – and he left school.

The schools responded in a variety of ways to the problems posed and experienced by these young men at school. Responses were of two types – the responses to the incident or incidents the young men were involved in and then whether or not they responded to the needs of youth and to the factors that were shaping their behaviour.

#### *(b) Responding to Incidents*

With respect to responding to the incidents that the young people were involved in at school the schools responded with a range of disciplinary techniques. Thirteen of the 14 participants who reported trouble at school indicated that the school responded with suspensions and, when their behaviour escalated, expelling them. The most common behaviours for which they were suspended and expelled were truancy and fighting. For fighting, in particular, expulsions are a core part of educational policy of 'zero tolerance of fighting. However, for our respondents the situation was viewed more complexly. While some young men were bullies, most reported that they used violence to address being teased or 'disrespected' by other students. Participants also reported that if you put up with being teased or disrespected or bullied or if you back down when someone else wants to fight with you then you are risking a lot – you lose status and face.

In addition to suspensions and expulsions, three respondents reported that schools provided advice – including one principal who told respondent #2 that he could drop out at 16, and Respondents #12 and #15 who reported that teachers and principals supported and listened to them. Finally, one respondent reported that his school banned him from playing on sports teams for his negative behaviour. He found this really problematic because this was the most positive aspect of school for him and he felt that it set him up for failure. His response was to drop out.

Respondents were also provided with support through referrals to alternative schools, and special support units. There were programs at community houses

to assist with reintegrating youth expelled from school back into the school system. They were also referred to high school programs that better matched their intellectual achievement. In short, the schools had and used an array of tools to respond to the behaviours participants were involved in at school. Responses that were appropriate given the behaviours, the risk to other students, and the zero tolerance policy.

*(c) Responding to Needs and to Underlying Causes of School-Based Problems*  
While schools also responded to the behaviour we were also interested in how they responded to the young people's needs and to the factors that might be shaping their behaviour. One common need, given that most of these young people were immigrants to Canada, was for language training. All the youth who came to Canada at an older age were provided with ESL training and were eventually integrated into regular school system. Most did learn English and all were able to communicate effectively during the interviews. So, the language training seems to have been quite successful – at least for spoken language. However, ESL education did not work well for all participants. For example, participant #7 reported being frustrated that he was failing in his regular high school classes because of his language problems.

Beyond, the provision of needed language skills, we also considered how schools responded to the factors underlying participants' behaviours. Six of the fourteen participants who reported school-based problems indicated that their schools did nothing beyond responding to the incidents or reporting the behaviour to their parents. Ali (participant #1) came from an extremely violent family; his father beat his mother and the children. Beatings could be for something as simple as not tying your shoes correctly or holding your spoon in the wrong way. He hated his father being so controlling and resented his mother for being weak. He gradually began to rebel against rules of any kind and he became aggressive and confrontational at school. He became gang-involved and this was known at school. He says he was labelled a gang-member and that led him to be excluded from a 'nice' high school after he was taken into care. After the expulsion from that school, he ran away from care and ended up on the street and dealing to survive. It is difficult to know how the school might have responded. Ali had previously done well at school, so testing him for a learning disability – a common response when youth are disruptive, defiant, and aggressive in school – did not seem to be appropriate. However, he might have benefitted from psychological counselling. He was not referred to these services. While, he maintained an appearance of normalcy and he was reluctant to talk about what was happening at home to people at school (indeed he says he thought that such behaviour was normal), the fact that he was taken into care for a severe beating should have triggered some kind of assessment and support.

As we noted above, Mo (Participant #4) became a problem at school in grade 9 – he was truant, gang-involved, and using drugs. The school responded only to his behaviour not the reasons for it. His assessment of the situation was that his behaviour was simply not bad enough to trigger any investigative response. He had done well in his early years at school so thought that the failing grades in high school would not have triggered an assessment for a learning disability. He reported having flash backs and bad dreams about things he had witnessed in the war in Somalia and drinking and smoking weed to cope. But, he was not particularly disruptive and he continued to attend school, though erratically, for 4 years. He did not graduate.

Rogi's (participant #5) experiences were somewhat different from the other two. He had serious behaviour problems since he came to Canada. He was suspended for assaulting another student in grade 4 and his family was evicted because of his violent behaviour towards others. He says despite serious problems he was never tested for a learning disability OR for psychological problems. He reported serious physical abuse by his biological father before coming to Canada and witnessing violence in the Ukraine – murders, people being assaulted - and that his father was gang involved. Here again, he might have benefitted from psychological testing. It was only after coming into conflict with the law at age 16 that he received court-ordered testing.

Participant #12 (Mustafa) also had early school-based problems related to fighting. He was not tested for learning disabilities or assessed for psychological problems despite being in serious trouble by age nine. He was offered a lot of personal support. The Principal in his grade school would bring him into the office and help him to calm down. The teachers were supportive and when Mustafa had to change schools near the end of grade 5 one of his teachers drove to his new home and picked him up so he could attend the grade 5 graduation. Mustafa had not been to school prior to coming to Canada and he and his family had left during the Somali civil war. His father died suddenly before the war and as his father had more than one family there was little left to support them. He says he fought because other people picked on him. He says he did not know where all his anger came from and neither did his mother – she didn't understand why he was fighting so much. While his mother was concerned about the problems at school and she did discipline him for fighting, he never went to counselling. In his community he thought that this was not possible.

Ali2 began skipping school to escape teasing. His non-attendance was discussed with his parents at a Parent-Teacher conference. His parents were very upset when they found this out and he got a beating when they got home. No one (neither the school nor his parents) sought professional support to

understand why he was skipping. His parents' response was to demand that he attend and the school passed the responsibility on to his parents.

T was failing his high school classes because of his weak English. He became frustrated and started skipping. The school responded with a letter of concern which T's mother opened and agreed to hide the letter from T's dad if he promised to start attending. T agreed but did not go back to school. Eventually he was expelled much to his father's shock. He did eventually go back and finish school after his English improved.

For the remaining eight, the schools tried a number to respond to these young men's needs in a range of ways. These responses were tailored to the specifics of the situation. For example, when Jay failed two courses in grade 9, the school recommended that he attend summer school and repeat the courses. They felt this would set him up for moving on to grade 10 with his peers. His mother, however, had a different plan. As Jay was one year ahead for his age she thought it best that he repeat the entire ninth grade. He would be with kids his own age and would have a better grounding. So, despite the school's recommendation, Jay was kept behind. He did ninth grade again with kids who'd been a grade behind him at middle school. He says he felt embarrassed and wanted to quit.

Participants 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, and 16 were all tested for learning disabilities. Five of six were found to have learning disabilities. Chase (participant #10) who had problems early on in school received lots of support. He was sent for testing and supported for a learning disability. He was put into the Special Support Unit; he was given a mentor – a high school student; he really liked the mentoring support. He was often in care due to his problematic behaviour at home and the school board tried to keep him in his home school bussing him to and from his group home. When Chase wanted to try the regular system (he hated the SSU) the school did let him try. He struggled in the regular classes and his grades were very weak. But none of these supports seemed to help. He had had a horrific early childhood and a range of emotional problems. His adoptive parents were very supportive but they had to put him into care periodically because they could not cope with his disruptive behaviour at home.

Kolong (participant #17) had witnessed the murder of his grandfather in the Sudan and began to exhibit increasingly aggressive behaviour at school in high school. He was tested for a learning disability and given enriched support. He found this helped him because he was given extra time to do tests and assignments. He was suspended from the regular system but went back to adult high school and was on track to graduate.

Bahroz (participant #14) was also diagnosed with a learning disability. This was in high school and he was put into the SSU. He disliked being in the unit and quickly came into conflict with the teachers. Ironically, his frustration at being put in a special support unit accelerated his leaving school. Participant #15 (Walid) was diagnosed with ADD and provided medication. He took it for a while but found that while he was better able to sit down and listen, he was also falling asleep by 1500 and so he went off the medication. Not surprisingly his problematic behaviour returned and he was quickly in trouble again. He did try to self medicate with marijuana which he says worked but coming to class high and smelling strongly of dope brought him into conflict with the school as well. Modi was also tested for a learning disability and diagnosed with ADD (he also had mental health issues). He did not take medication and sought to be put in a program where he could learn a trade. The school did put him in a trades program, but he got into a fight and was expelled. Random #1 was tested and found to have ADHD. He was put on Ritalin and when he was on his medication he reported his school behaviour improved. However, his home life was very disorganised and so he did not always take his medication. When he got into his early teens he began to sell his Ritalin which meant his behaviour became unruly. James (participant #13) was the only participant tested for a learning disability for whom the results were inconclusive. With no diagnosis, he could not be treated. He was, however, tested and treated for mental health issues. We discuss this below.

Six participants (10, 11, 13, 15, 17, and 18) were tested for mental health problems. One (#15) was diagnosed with depression but did not follow through on the treatment because he was upset with being diagnosed as “mentally ill”. James (#13) had an anxiety disorder and was put on medication but went off it with his mother’s permission at age 8; within 3 years, he was expelled from school. The third (Modi - #11) was not found to have a mental health problem but, as noted above was diagnosed with ADD. The fourth participant (Chase - #10) was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress (PTSD) and oppositional defiant disorders. He was treated but this was not successful. His problems became more serious as he grew older. We discuss mental health issues in more detail below. Random #1 (participant #18) was diagnosed with a panic disorder which was treated. Kolongo (#17) was also assessed but he says he is not sure what, if anything, he was diagnosed with. This was in grade 8 after a fight at school.

One underlying issue at school that contributed, in particular, to participants getting into fights but for some also led to school avoidance was confrontations at school. These included being bullied or teased for their dress, their poor English, cultural clashes around issues of respect, and outright racism. Only three of the 14 participants with school-based problems reported no teasing, bullying



or racism at school. These included racial slurs and different racial groups sitting separately in the school cafeteria and not hanging out together. There was a general tension around race. Fights often centered around participants' feeling disrespected. Here, there were clashes of cultures. An incident would occur with particular meaning to the young man involved which others did not share. Participant #7 (T) told of the following incident. The kids were sitting on the ground in the gym and another boy touched (accidentally or perhaps on purpose) T on the head with his feet. To T this was disrespectful. He demanded an apology and the other boy thought he was making too much of something insignificant and would not apologise. This, for T, required that he teach the boy that he could not disrespect T and so T assaulted him.

*(d) School Leaving*

Not surprisingly, given the array of problems that participants posed for schools, all but one dropped out or were expelled before graduating. Youth expelled before they reached the age of 16 were given placements in alternative schools but most either did not attend or did so only briefly and then dropped out or were suspended.

Table 1: Grade Left School

Grade Left School	Expelled	Quit
Grade 8/9	5	2
Grade 10/11	2	6
Grade 11/12		1

Table 1 presents the results on school leaving. One participant (#13) had been expelled by grade 8 and four others were expelled in grade 9; two also quit in grade nine. All of these young men were too young to legally be out of school and they were involved in alternate school placements. Six of the remaining eight participants quit in high school and two were expelled. Participants were often expelled from multiple schools in the city as they tried to 'make it' in a new setting with different teachers. These lateral transfers were not successful.

But there is an important feature to note. Most of these young men continue to try to complete school. Participant #15 (Walid) was expelled in grade 9. He now has 15 credits half of the 30 credits required to graduate and before being incarcerated 'interrupted' his studies he was going to the Adult High School. Bahroz (participant #14) was expelled in grade 10 but now has completed 27 credits towards his high school diploma. T. (participant #7) was expelled in grade 11. He was able to go back to school and graduate. He then got a 'straight' job though he had to lie about his record to do so. However, he found that the pay was limited and he began dealing again. Ali was expelled halfway through grade 10. He did get to an alternate school where he found the

principal very supportive but he timed out at 18 and did not finish. He did try the Adult High School but dropped out and was in St. Nicholas Adult just before he went to jail. Both Kolong and Random#1 were in an adult high school program. Only five participants (three were the Canadian-born participants) were out of school and were not planning on going back at the time of the interviews. Clearly, most of these young men valued their education.

### *Discussion*

Schools were a site where the difficulties and problems these young people were experiencing became public matters. While some of the young people in this study had few problems at school and occasional fights or truancy which is unlike to garner intensive assessment, most were in serious trouble. It is not clear why schools assessed some young men and not others but this needs to be further explored. We need to consider what tools might assist schools in identifying when behaviours such as truancy and fighting are signs of serious underlying problems or of bullying at school. But, while schools responded to the negative behaviours they sometimes failed to respond to the underlying causes. Though, even where they did respond to the underlying problems, the assessment alone did not resolve the situation. Young people and their parents did not always follow through with treatment and the stigma of being, as they saw it, labelled as 'stupid' or 'crazy' created problems and tensions.

There were tensions around culture and pervasive bullying and teasing at school; multicultural education would be an important tool for educating ALL young people about differences in cultural beliefs and meanings that can assist them in understanding why people respond to incidents the way they do. This should also be extended to teachers.

### **Recreation**

Recreation, engaging in pro-social activities, is related to keeping youth out of gangs and to reducing involvement in criminal activities generally. We asked young people about their involvement in recreational activities. All of our participants had involvement with sports or other activities at school. Half (8 of 16) had no organised activities outside of school, five had some organised activities and three had many organised activities. Participants who did sports in the community were involved in less expensive sports like soccer, baseball, and basketball. For most, cost was an issue and they indicated that they did not have sufficient money to participate in sports – even when the costs were minimal. In addition to sports, some (five participants) also went to the local community house, to the Boys & Girls Club, and to the Y. Two worked, as teenagers, at their local community house where they mentored younger children; some were involved in raising money for local programs and teams.

While young people were involved in recreational activities when they were younger, all participants (except one - participant #3) were not involved in community-based activities past the age of 15. The reasons for their disengagement varied. Some reported that they 'timed out' of programs – so they could not go to the Boys & Girls Club past age 15 (e.g., participant #12) . One (participant #15) reported that at the local community house the person running the programs offered to pay the boys for giving them the names of gang members. He thought this was wrong and left the program. For some programs were not available for older youth and those who were already gang or crime involved found themselves unwelcome at community centres or community houses.

In addition to organised activities, all of our participants were involved in informal activities in their neighbourhoods. All of them hung out, to varying degrees, on the local sports fields and basketball courts and played pick-up games. Here they had fun and got to know one another. But, most were also exposed to older boys and men, many of whom were gang-involved and/or dealing drugs. Indeed, most reported their first exposure to dealing and gangs was on these sports fields. By their mid-teens, most had disengaged from pro-social activities and were involved in illegal activities and in trouble at school and with the law.

The role recreation played in criminal activity is difficult to assess. A common element for participants was the involvement in sports and other recreational activities gave these young men a sense of pride and accomplishment. While their abilities varied, they all enjoyed playing sports, the camaraderie, and their accomplishments. Even pick-up games in the community, were valued and positive experiences for them. In part, community-based activities allowed them to hang out with the people they wanted to, unlike school where they were participating with a mixture of people some of whom they were and some they were not comfortable with. However, hanging out also put them in close contact with street gangs and with other youth who were gang involved.

Overall, it is clear is that participation did not protect these young men from becoming involved in gangs. It is also clear that there are barriers to participation including the costs and for some a lack of knowledge about programs and how to become involved. Participant #3 (D) was the most involved in sports in the community and his entry into crime was the most delayed.

### **Spirituality**

Involvement in religious institutions can also provide youth with supports that reduce the likelihood that they will become gang involved. We asked

participants about their involvement in religion and about spirituality and considered whether their faith experiences changed over time.

Table 2: Attendance at Religious Services:

Attended Services Before Coming to Canada <sup>a</sup>		Attended Services in Canada <sup>b</sup>	
No	2	No	6
Sometimes	4	Sometimes	4
Regularly	7	Regularly	6

<sup>a</sup> Applies only to youth who immigrated to Canada (13 of 16 participants)

<sup>b</sup> Includes all 16 participants

As Table 2 indicates, most of these young men (11 of 13 before coming to Canada; 10 of 16 in Canada) had some religious affiliation and were involved with their faiths. For the young men who immigrated there was a change religious attendance after they came to Canada. Most found it more challenging to attend services after they came to Canada. The issue identified for some was that there was no house of worship close to their place of residence. In addition, participants reported that to go to services they were dependent on adults to get them to and from services. Parents were often working, some did not have cars and while public transportation was an option it required some money, which was in short supply. These were barriers that had not faced prior to coming to Canada. For the Canadian born participants, only one was involved in a faith community growing up. While his family attended regularly he resisted going and was not attached to his church community.

Generally, young people went to services when someone took them. But, as they grew older it became less important to them. Some young men did not attend services but attempted to hold on to some aspects of their faith. Modi always tried to do Friday prayers – though he says it was hard doing it all on his own. Overall, even those who did attend services reported that were not involved in their religious communities. They went to services (on and off) but they were not really a part of a faith community. One exception was Kolong who reported that religion was important and that he liked attending Church. He went with his Grandmother (who still goes) and reported that he still goes once and a while. Another exception was D (participant #3) was very active in his faith community. He converted from being a Roman Catholic to being a Seventh Day Adventist and went to services both with another family and on his own. He was active in the choir and also did preaching. He is the young man who was able to get to University and who was the oldest when he became involved in dealing. Both these young men had limited criminal justice system involvement – D only became involved when he could no longer afford school and Kolongo is the only participant who has NOT been charged with a crime.

All of these young men eventually stopped attending services. For most of the youth who were immigrants to Canada this occurred almost immediately after they came to Canada. But, for the majority (13 of the 16 participants) they stopped attending as their involvement with delinquent peers, gangs and then street life developed. For some this was an issue of rebellion. Ali (Participant #1) stopped attending the mosque because he felt his violent and abusive father was just using the faith as an excuse for his behaviour. He was taken into care at 14 and was in a Muslim group home which he liked; by 15 he was on the streets and no longer involved in his faith. For Jay (participant #2) going to Church was something he did with his whole family. His mother tried to make their Sunday services special and would take the children for Chinese Buffet after service. However, he found church problematic because " ... as soon as I was out of church, I was back in the war zone." He too stopped attending as he became more gang involved. Chase described resenting being "forced to go to church" and while his parents took him to church, he would not stay. He described it as 'hocus pocus'.

Here again, religious support did not provide most of the youth with protection. This reflects their lack of involvement or attachment to their faith communities. Jay's observation that religious groups spoke about a 'reality' in sharp contrast to the 'war zone' of his life, may provide a partial explanation of why religious groups were not reaching young men. It is also clear that simply getting to services posed a challenge. It would be useful to have services in the neighbourhoods and to have outreach that addressed the concerns and issues that youth experienced.

### **Health/Mental Health**

Mental health issues emerged as a core concern in the interviews. Twelve of the 16 participants interviewed reported mental health issues or diagnoses. Of these 12, ten reported severe trauma including witnessing friends/relatives being killed, fleeing civil war and walking over dead bodies, four suffered severe violence in their families including one who's older brother attempted to sexually assault him, and others were exposed to bombings and refugee camps. Of the four who reported no severe trauma one was a young man whose parents divorced which seems to have been a major contributor to his anxiety disorder (though his father also has an anxiety disorder), one has bipolar and symptoms of schizoid-effective disorder a condition that can be genetic but which he feels was related to his drug use, and a third reported no trauma though his father deserted the family and the militia and people said he was a coward which Walid found upsetting. The fourth had fled the civil war in the Congo but was not exposed to any violence. His father remained in Africa and he now has a new family that was a source of some stress.

We also asked respondents about seeking and receiving treatment for the conditions. Only five of the 12 reporting diagnosed mental health problems received any treatment. Three were white and Canadian-born; their conditions were treated when they were young children. One was prescribed drugs for an anxiety disorder (participant #13), one (participant #18) was treated for a panic disorder, and the third had on-going counselling and other professional supports (participant #10). All three reported that their treatment was not successful. James (participant #13) reported that he found the medication was not really helping and his mother let him stop taking it. No further treatment was sought even though he continued to act out violently at school. Chase (participant #10) had severe trauma in his early years and received extensive, on-going support. He indicated that he lied to his therapists and did not reveal many of his problems including that he was having blackouts and flashbacks. Random#1 came from a neglectful family. His mother was severely depressed due to the death of one of her children. His older brother was physically violent and had attempted to sexually assault him. The older brother was removed from the home. He reports treatment did not help. He continued to experience panic attacks and used street drugs to self-medicate.

The remaining two participants who received treatment were new Canadians. Jay (participant #2) was diagnosed as bipolar and with schizoid-affective disorder. He was sent for assessment after he began smearing excrement on the walls while in custody. He was assessed, diagnosed, and is currently medicated. He is doing well on medication. Bahroz (participant #14) reported that he was given anger management training to deal with his rages at school. While he found talking to someone one-on-one helped, the program was only 4 months long and then treatment ended. His underlying exposure to trauma (bombings during the Iran/Iraq war) was never addressed. It was his behaviour that was the focus of treatment.

Of the remaining 7 participants with mental health problems, only one was formally assessed and diagnosed and he refused treatment. He (participant #11) was "insulted by the diagnosis" and would not go back to the doctor. Why were the remaining 6 young men not even assessed? There was a general resistance to being identified as having a mental illness and this limited the ability for them to be treated for mental health issues. Consider Ali2's situation (participant #9). His father was an important figure in Ali2's life and he died because his cancer was not diagnosed until it was too late (despite his living for several years with chronic back pain). Ali2 was severely depressed but he did not seek help because "... in the environment I was living you don't go to counsellors or doctors – it was a poor environment and a tough environment – pretty much it was survival and when you're looking to survive you won't be thinking about doctors and counsellors – you're just thinking about how to go on

with your day.” He also felt that strangers don’t really understand your pain so it is not really helpful to talk to them about it – this was a family issue. Mo (participant #4) described stepping over bodies when they fled in the civil war. His mother deserted the family and he came to Canada to live with a father he didn’t even remember. He had flashbacks, bad dreams and felt guilty about surviving but he never sought any counselling. He denied there was a problem saying that the war had no real effect on him. Yet, he self-medicated with weed and alcohol to help him cope. Barhop’s (participant #12) family left Iran to escape the war; his father had been seriously injured, there were bombings in the city and the kids were sometimes not allowed to go to school because of shootings. He was being taunted at school and was beaten up in his neighbourhood. He was violent at school and in serious trouble by grade 4. He did not talk to his parents about what he described as his ‘frustration’ because he felt they would just get angry at him and he could do nothing about it. He knew his parents had their own problems and he did not want to put any more pressure on them.

Respondent #8 (Abdul) would not even talk about mental health issues, declining to answer the initial question on this issue. However, later in the interview he said that his friend had been killed in the war when Abdul was 11 and that he had been very depressed by that. He also said he was also depressed because he felt so oppressed by his experiences since coming to Canada – especially the racism he was exposed to here. His resistance to talking about these issues probably contributed to his never receiving any assessment or treatment.

Ali (participant #1) experienced horrific family violence. He was beaten severely at age 14 and a neighbour called the police. Ali was taken into care. Despite, serious problems at school, being a known gang member, and being depressed he received no treatment. For him, violence seemed natural and at home there was “... no affection, not talking, no help for my emotional s\*\*\*. .. I was just stuck with bad family relations.” He says that they “ ... didn’t know that counselling was an option. We didn’t grow up with that – it’s not a part of the culture.” Indeed, when his mother eventually found out about her legal rights, she made her husband leave and got a restraining order. When he violated that order she called the police and Ali’s father ended up jail where all his three sons were also incarcerated. Ali was angry with his mother for calling the police and “sending him [Ali’s father] to jail ... I can’t respect her for this. I’m trying not to talk to her too much because my anger will come out – I don’t like to see my father in jail – to see him cry and break down.”

Responding to mental health issues is complex. Issues of identifying youth in need, of getting them assessed, and of their attitude or willingness to accept

help are all involved. Cultural factors led some to refuse treatment or to view seeking help as an alternative. For many though, their behaviours did not lead to a recommendation for assessment, let alone treatment. In part, this seems to be because youth with problems are referred to their families as the primary place where such issues are dealt with and families are not always open to this. It is concerning if youth exposed to severe trauma are not assessed when they come into Canada. However, this may reflect parents' assuming that children are fine and, again, a culture that believes such issues are best dealt with in the home. This brings us to the issue of parents and parenting.

### **Parents and Parenting**

In addition to considering the connections young people had to institutional supports, the role of family and parents also emerged as a critical factor in their becoming gang-involved. Participants came from a range of family types. Nine participants came from single parent families - eight were female-headed (mother) and one was male-headed (father). Among the single-parent households, seven participants other parent had left or deserted the family, one had died, and one participant's parents were divorced and shared custody though he lived primarily with his mother. Seven lived with both parents. Of these seven, one was living with adoptive parents after being taken from his parents for severe abuse and neglect. For the other six, two families had been single-parent families for three and five years respectively while the other parent was sponsored to come to Canada. For the family that was separated for five years, the family was together in Canada for about six or seven years and then the father died of cancer. Finally four participants lived with both parents all the time they were growing up.

The interviews explored questions related to parenting – both the challenges and the solutions parents sought to deal with raising their children. We discuss these issues in below.

### **Challenges**

We found that there were a range of challenges and a range of responses as families struggled to cope with poverty, family breakup and loss, and, for new Canadians, coping with a new country and cultural milieu. Five issues emerged around parenting challenges:

- Youth being able to hide issues and concerns from parents because the parents were unaware of the danger signs and what was happening in the neighbourhoods
- Youth received little supervision by parents – they were hanging out



- Parents' cultural experiences included expecting other community members to be engaged in ensuring that youth in the community were acting properly – including schools, other parents, and people living in the neighbourhoods.
- The paradox of successful siblings.
- Sharing the wealth.

#### *(a) Hiding the Truth*

Thirteen of the sixteen youth reported that they were successful in hiding their negative behaviours and their involvement with gangs, drugs, alcohol, violence, and school-failure from their parents. They did this through a variety of mechanisms. A common mechanism was ensuring that parents were unaware of drug and alcohol use was to never come home drunk or high. This might involve crashing at a friend's place or managing when you used drugs and alcohol. Youth hid school based-problems by lying to parents – one went so far as to forge his report cards. They also acted as translators for parents and hid issues that way. They hid the fact that they were involved in fights and had injuries. They also lied outright. But, in many cases they had to make little effort since parents were unaware of what was happening in the community and what the danger signs were that youth were at risk for coming into conflict with the law.

Parents did not know that the playground and sports fields were also places where drugs were being sold and where gang members recruited street-level dealers. They did not know that youth were being challenged and had to fight to ensure that others would not see them as weak and to get connected to other guys so that someone had their backs. The violence was rarely of the dramatic type – guns shots, murders, or serious bodily harm – that would garner attention. So, it was under the radar for most parents and the boys did not tell them what was going on. This was true even when the young men were being harmed and targeted. They settled it among themselves.

Participants also often did not want to burden their parents with their problems and challenges. Most knew that their parents were struggling hard to survive day-to-day and to keep them fed and housed. They did not want to burden them with their problems instead they found ways to deal with it themselves which often included hooking up with guys and running in groups to protect themselves.

#### *(b) Supervision*

Poor supervision has been identified as a common factor related to youth becoming gang involved and 12 of our 16 respondents reported that their parents provided little supervision and allowed them to hang out. But, the

reasons why they did this varied. Immigrant parents were often working and attempting to study English. This left them little time to supervise their children. Some parents did try to limit their children from 'hanging out'. Five participants reported that their mother had no authority and as she was the primary caregiver this allowed them to do pretty much what they wanted all the time if she was a single parent and most of the time even when their father was in the home because their fathers worked. In addition, parents often knew where their children were but were not aware of the risks that 'hanging out' at the basketball court, for example, actually entailed.

Parents did try to keep their sons at home and to limit the amount of time they hung out. Some over-supervised, not allowing their children to do anything which led to rebellion and defiance (Participant #1). Some identified some spaces as dangerous and supervised those but did not know of the risks in other spaces. Consider Chase's experience. His parents did not like him hanging out at the skate boarding park and regulated his activities closely. What they did not know was that during the times he was in care because they could not deal with his behaviour he was in contact with other youth in care who introduced him to gang involvement. Some parents simply did not supervise their children. Random#1 reported that his mother, who suffered from severe depression after the death of one of her children, " .. didn't really care what I was doing. She tried sometimes but was never able to follow through with it."

Generally, parents questioned where their sons were and what they were doing. They were upset and angry when their children defied curfews or were in trouble at school. They waited up for them, grounded them, lectured them on their behaviour, and in some cases locked them out of the house. But, our participants reported being undeterred. They found ways around these things – including bringing family members (cousins or older brothers who were themselves crime and gang involved) along with them for protection. Others hung out when they knew their fathers would not be around to discipline them. They also reported that as they grew older parents did allow them more freedom and so hanging out became more accepted.

### *(c) Expectations*

Immigrant parents also had expectations that their children's behaviour would be monitored by others. This was understood by the participants. I put it this way:

They [parents] don't know how to be parents in a different culture, what that means, because they were raised on different things. Parents don't know about all the risks out there and they want to give their kids the freedom other kids have. But, here if

you slip there is no one to back you up. Here people don't interfere if you do bad. At home, they would grab you by the ear and take you home.

Parents also expected schools to punish negative behaviours and to call them for any transgression. For example, for most of the participants who were immigrants, not doing homework or performing well at school would garner a beating at school and a call home and then a beating at home. Schools were expected to call for every transgression and to take responsibility for reporting this. So, parents were unprepared for a system where children were, perhaps, warned and reprimanded for not doing homework and assignments but not punished and parents not alerted.

Youth too found the new cultural milieu challenging. They were used to other adults telling them to go home or to not behave in particular ways. Youth who prior to coming to Canada lived in housing compounds and had contact only with family members (participants #2 and #3) found that they were not ready to self monitor on when to come home and who to hang out with. Participants who had always been home by dark and had other adults including extended family watch over them just stayed out. They found they could engage in a wide range of unacceptable behaviours and no one would intervene. One participant reported that the first time he tried drugs was after his grade 8 graduation at a friend's home. The friend's mother caught them but she did not tell his mother, she warned him that she would if she caught him again.

#### *(d) The Paradox of Successful Siblings*

One of the facts that parents and participants had to grapple with was that many have successful (non crime involved) siblings. Fifteen participants had brothers and of these eight had a brother or brothers who were involved in crimes. Two (Jay and D) are brothers. One participant (Chase) had one brother in trouble and but his other siblings (one brother and 2 sisters) were ok. Both Chase and his brother had been removed from an abusive home and adopted. Ali had also come from an abusive home. He and both of his brothers were also violent and in conflict with the law. Mo's older brother had been gang involved before Mo became involved; Mustafa and his brother were both in jail. Random#1 had an older brother who was violent and attempted to sexually assault him. He was taken into care but Random#1 did not report that he was involved in criminal activity. Seven participants had male siblings who were not in conflict with the law. They were working, in the army, or pursuing higher education. Some had younger siblings who were still in grade or high school and doing well.

Ten participants had sisters. All but one of them were NOT in conflict in the law. Some were still in grade school but others were pursuing post-secondary education, were married and doing well. One had a sister with a doctorate. Abdul has three sisters and he described the situation this way: "They are so well educated now I can't even talk to them." One participant, Kolong, had a younger sister who was picked up at the mall for shoplifting.

There are a number of intriguing features here. First, is that when respondents were the only child in trouble it was easy for them to blame themselves – to say they had chosen the wrong road or were the bad seed. The question of why these young people were in trouble and not their siblings needs further investigation. This had been a planned part of the study; however, participants did not want us to talk to their siblings or parents so it was not pursued. But, it clearly needs further investigation. It is important to further explore why the boys are in trouble while their sisters are not. Participants commented on it noting that their sisters were not allowed to hang out – they just stayed home and studied. They felt that the girls were somehow better protected than the boys.

#### *(e) Sharing the Wealth*

One issue that participants reported was how their involvement in gangs provided them with lots of money. They reported using the money they earned selling drugs on purchasing luxury goods: electronic equipment, flashy clothes, cars, and jewellery. They were visibly 'wealthy'. Why did their parents not react to this and question them about their activities? Some probably did and this likely contributed to some participants being 'kicked out'.

Other did not. One reason may have been that many of these young men gave money to their siblings and parents. So, Walid spoke of taking the father role and buying his sister her graduation dress. Modi was rewarding his 13 year old brother for getting good grades with money and presents (clothes, electronics) so he would not go down the same path that Modi had. Modi also gave his parents between \$200 and \$300 a month. He said he only gave that much so his mother would not be suspicious about where he got his money. When Ali2 sold drugs at 13 and bought a play station his mother let him keep it. She also allowed him to drop out of school at 14 to work when the family was having financial problems. He provided money from his dealing to the family. Jay too gave his mother money when he was dealing – though he did not support his brother through University and D ended up dropping out, getting into dealing and into jail. While this reflects their strong ethic of care, it is also troubling. It raised questions about how aware parents were that their sons might have been engaged in illegal activities. Did they turn a blind eye to what was going on because of a need for money? Again, there are more questions than answers here and this needs to be investigated further.

## **Responding to Challenges**

Participants revealed that their parents coped with their behaviour and parental concerns in a wide range of ways including: moving to get away from negative influences (2 participants), kicking youth out of the house (5 participants), physical punishment (4 participants), monitoring their contacts and friends (3 participants), not allowing them to hang out or grounding them (5 participants), lecturing or talking to them about concerns (6 participants), and seeking support (3 participants). These look like a typical array of responses to youth that parents use. However, youth reported that in their view some of these solutions were quite problematic and parents did not fully understand the implications of what they did. Consider, for example, for the young men whose parent(s) kicked them out. All five reported that being thrown out led them deeper into gang life – as they now had to deal drugs to support themselves. Parents expected that they would be on their own and quickly return home and would 'behave' themselves. They had no idea that they were pushing youth deeper into gang life.

Violence also did not work. Parents who tried physical abuse found that it either drove their children out of the house or had only short term impacts. Violence made young men angry, some stopped their parents from hitting, one was taken into care because of the violence. But, most were aware that they could leave if they chose and that after age 16 they were beyond the reach of the schools, could work if they wanted, and could leave home at any time.

Moving kids out of the neighbourhood was a strategy that some families employed though this did not generally work. Two participants' parents moved the whole family which was expensive; they had to pay the cost of moving and housing in the new neighbourhoods was often expensive. But, what also happened was that their sons simply got on the bus or got a lift and went back to their old neighbourhoods and hung out with their friends. Three others sent their children out of the community for school to better schools. This did not work either. Youth found they fit in even less in these usually wealthier and less multicultural schools. The exception was D. who went to a French-language school where they wore uniforms. He did well in school.

Parents also exhibited behaviours that had negative impacts on their children and contributed to them hanging out and becoming engaged in criminal behaviour. This included violence by fathers towards children and towards mothers for four participants and parents hiding participants' negative behaviour from the other parent or ignoring it which allowed the behaviour to continue. These behaviours contributed to both the emotional distress youth were experiencing and to their not getting any help. These violent behaviours

were described by parents and the young people as normal responses to negative behaviour. The impacts were denied.

### **Solutions**

Participants offered a range of solutions to assist parents in knowing the risks and in how to deal with them. They noted the mismatch between what parents expected – a more collective responsibility for young people in the community – and the reality - an individualised approach where each family was responsible for its own children. They felt that parents should be told about this. Parents needed to know that they should not expect the schools, for example, to call for every missed assignment and that they were responsible for monitoring their own children.

They were also aware that monitoring children was a challenge for parents who were often working – sometimes two or more jobs – and trying to learn English. They offered a range of possible solutions including having children teach parents English – so they could be together and learn at the same time. They also thought that parents needed to be aware of the danger signs and to be educated on them – programs have to be culturally sensitive and they have to have information on supports and solutions.

Parents also need to be people youth can talk to, people they can share their feelings, frustrations and experiences with. It was hard to share such things when parents are over-burdened with struggling to survive and when their response was to be angry. So, fights at school related to being disrespected, teased, or assaulted were all too often responded to with demands for 'good' behaviour with no understanding of the personal cost youth felt they paid by backing down. It was hard to explain about racism and hostility to immigrants, about being looked down on because of the neighbourhood you lived in, and ridiculed or feeling you stood out because of how you dressed or spoke to parents who did not listen.

Finally, youth thought that poverty and the inability of parents to ensure that their children had opportunities to engage in pro-social activities needed to be addressed. When families are unable to adequately feed their children, young men are going to be drawn to the easy money of dealing. This allows them to help their families and to meet their own needs, to have what other kids have.

### **Neighbourhoods**

While institutions and parents were important factors in responding to youth and assisting them in staying out of gangs or contributing to their involvement, it was the neighbourhoods that youth identified most strongly as the core factor in their

becoming gang involved. Youth lived in a number of neighbourhoods across the city and some lived in more than one community over time.

Table 3 – Communities

Community <sup>2</sup>	
West Priority Area	11
South Priority Area	4
Other	1

Respondents were asked how they felt about their neighbourhoods and about their experiences in their communities. All the participants (except #10 who lived in middle class neighbourhoods and whose exposure to gangs came through being in care) reported that there was violence and drugs in their Ottawa neighbourhoods. The nature of the violence was wide ranging from shootings and murders, to home invasions, assaults, and people getting jumped. Not surprisingly most participants reported feeling unsafe. One exception was Rogi who indicated that his Ottawa neighbourhood was less violent than his neighbourhood in the Ukraine. For most, these neighbourhoods were not 'familiar'. Indeed, they were quite foreign in many ways including a new language and different cultural values. There was little support for the transition for either the youth coming into these situations or for the host societies.

Connection to other youth in the community and observation supplied the youth with support and with information about what was going on and what was acceptable. Friends were key in protecting youth from assaults by others. They were also people that participants had a commitment to supporting. This often involved them "jumping in" when their friends were involved in fights, were being 'disrespected', or were 'jumped'. Friends also educated participants about gangs, about colours, and about gang-related graffiti. They also told them about drugs, dealing, and addicts. Youth mentored other youth about not allowing certain groups or people in their neighbourhood and the need to fight them to keep them out. They were introduced to crime by other youth and through what they 'picked up on the streets' by just watching what was going on. To not participate in many of these activities risked being marginalised and meant that no one had your back. This made going to the playground or to the basketball court a dangerous business. But, they also provided a vocabulary and rationale for engaging in these activities. It allowed them to see these activities as acceptable in Canadian society even when they were not acceptable in their culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Priority Areas were identified by the city in previous research. See: <http://crimepreventionottawa.ca/en/initiatives/youth-gangs>

They were also curious. They saw young men with flashy cars, nice clothes, expensive jewellery, lots of money, girlfriends, and who garnered respect and envy from others. They were drawn to these symbols of success and they, not surprisingly, wanted those things. The contrast between the lives of these young men and those of the participants was pretty stark. Many wanted the possessions and position that dealing would provide them. No one reported worrying about getting arrested. For some, being arrested was a key rite of passage. They believed it gave them stature. Fighting and not backing down gave youth a rep for being tough. It also made them safer as others within the neighbourhood were less likely to challenge them.

But, participants were not simply wide-eyed children enchanted by the possibilities attached to becoming involved in dealing drugs and attached to gangs. They made choices to participate in illegal activities. They chose to become involved in assaults, swarmings, shoplifting, robberies, home invasions, and a host of other crimes. Not all the young men in their neighbourhood or their circle of friends made these choices. Indeed, they recognized that they made choices. But, they were restricted choices. Youth were at times desperate and this contributed to their becoming involved. This included being homeless because parents threw them out and two young men who were trying to support their families when they were in crisis. It also included youth struggling to deal with mental health problems, emotional distress, family violence, school failure and other forms of personal distress. Drugs and alcohol were a means of self medicating, of coping. The former brought them into close involvement with gangs and often the latter led to their being violent.

Some participants did try to work at legitimate jobs with some success. Ali2 (participant #9) dropped out of school at 14 and worked a number of legitimate jobs (Restaurants, Retail Sales). Walid and Bahroz both found work at their local community centers. D also worked a number of jobs to support himself including at a local Grocery Store. But both D (participant #3) and Walid (participant #15) also noted that it was difficult for the young men they knew to get jobs. Walid noted that when people found out where he lived they wouldn't even take a job application from him. D reported that same thing and noted that parents were having trouble getting jobs so it was really challenging for the kids to get them. T. tried to get a legitimate job after his first jail sentence but found he had to lie about his record to do so. He also found that he made very little money compared to what he had made dealing drugs. Kolongo also worked a straight job at a local theatre. For others, a criminal record also limited their job possibilities and their involvement in the lucrative drug trade diminished their interest in working at the available jobs. For some, like James, were dealing as young as 13 and most had begun to deal drugs before they reached the



age of 16 and could work legal jobs. They were already into the drug trade before they were old enough to find legitimate work.

Neighbourhoods had some resources for youth and some sought to provide them with positive alternatives. However, not all areas have the same level of resourcing. Some had community centres or houses while others did not. These were key resources but for many the programs and youth attendance ended at around age 15. This was a period when gang involvement began to increase and often occurred at the same time as youth were experiencing school-based problems. This was a concern. Some youth (participants #3 and #8) stayed connected by volunteering at the community house/center. Others were not wanted there once they came into conflict with the law. Participants noted that programs were costly and that fundraising was a challenge. They felt under-resourced. But, they also found they out grew the kinds of games and activities available to them. The challenge remains how to provide activities that are appropriate for older youth at a time when they are transitioning from being children to being emergent adults.

## **Key Findings**

1. Youth gangs are active in the Ottawa area but seem to be concentrated in two priority areas: the west and the south.
2. Most of these participants were involved in youth gangs, a few were involved in street gangs. Those in youth gangs had connections to street gangs but they were on the margins. They are street-level dealers who have few connections to the formal gang structure and limited knowledge of how the inner circle functions.
3. Most of the youth who became gang involved have problems with school failure, had histories of using violence, and lived in violent communities.
4. Routes into gangs involved not just the actions of our participants but also the assessment of them by young men who were already gang involved.
5. Youth who are gang involved come from diverse backgrounds. For this study the only common factor was that all but one of these young people lived in high risk neighbourhoods.
6. Most of these young men involved in this study had school-based problems which the schools sought to respond to in a variety of ways. Some received assessments and treatments while others did not. Even those who were assessed did not always follow up with both youth themselves and parents failing to ensure that youth received treatment or followed-up on initial assessments.

7. Schools used a variety of responses but ultimately could do little to respond to psychological problems, culture clash, a lack of positive status and poverty.
8. Youth with mental health issues received limited treatment – some were not assessed but for others resistance to admitting such problems or to seeking help from professional limited the ability for mental health services to help them.
9. Recreation was important to youth and participants had some involvement with sports in school, in the community, in after school programs such as the Boys & Girls Club, the YMCA, and community houses or centers
10. Communities provided some activities for youth and most participants were involved in some activities. However, activities were usually directed at younger youth. There were few programs for older teens and young adults.
11. Religion was important to some and not to others. But youth with extensive, some and no religious involvement were involved in gang activities.
12. Parents struggled to parent in situations where they knew little of the risks in the community or the cultural factors that made for different parenting styles.
13. Communities that these young people lived in had gang activity, addicts, and violence present when the youth came into them. Their playgrounds were places where dealers sold drugs and recruited a new generation of street-level dealers.
14. Youth and their parents felt ill-prepared for their new cultural and living conditions and struggled to adjust.
15. Most participants spent considerable time in unsupervised activities 'hanging out' which put them at risk for coming into contact with gangs and with drug dealing.
16. Youth actively and successfully hid their involvement in anti-social or unacceptable behaviours from parents.
17. Most immigrant parents expected schools and other adult community members to play a role in ensuring that children behaved in pro-social ways based on their experiences in their countries of origin. Thus, youth were able to engage in a range of anti-social behaviours before their parents were aware they were at risk.

## **Conclusions**

Youth gangs are present in the Ottawa area though most youth are not gang-involved. Youth gang activity seems to be concentrated in the west and the

south priority areas. Most participants were in youth gangs and some were in street gangs. Their primary roles were as street-level drug dealers with some having a group of street-level dealers working for them. Gang-involved youth come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and this involvement cuts across racial and ethnic groups.

The research findings are in line with past research. Overall, youth who are gang-involved have weak ties to pro-social institutions. These ties reflect a complex interaction of the actions of the institutions, the youth, and the parents. Youth in this study had weak school attachment related to learning disabilities, mental health problems, and conflict around bullying and clashes of cultural values. These problems and issues were often NOT assessed and/or NOT treated or responded to.

Youth had experienced considerable trauma in their lives. This included severe family violence, abuse, and neglect. Others had come from war zones and experienced a range of traumas and losses. Some had lost parents through death and desertion and some had been refugees. These experiences shaped much of their lives. It seems that few of them were assessed for such challenges.

Schools were a key site where the problems youth were experiencing became a public concern. Much of the focus for schools is on responding to the incidents and the behaviours but not to the underlying problems. Recreation was available to youth and most played sports at school. Playing sports was limited by the costs and parents knowledge of opportunities. Recreational opportunities were not available for older youth – though this is in line with what is available to most Canadian youth. Mental health issues, in particular, contributed to anti-social behaviours including violence and drug and alcohol use. Families also played a role. Parents from immigrant communities struggled to parent in a context which provided less support than they expected. Families also seem to have been implicated in the process of gang involvement because these young men did spend some of their drug money on supporting their families. Not all youth growing up in these circumstances become gang involved. Indeed, most participants had successful siblings. This made it easier for their families and others to argue that it was the choices youth made that led to gang involvement. While it is true that these youth made bad choices, it is also true that their choices were constrained. Neighbourhoods were a critical factor here since they brought youth into contact with gang members, drug dealing, and violence. Neighbourhoods often had bad reputations which limited economic opportunities. Finding legitimate jobs was also a problem because most youth were gang and criminal justice system involved before they were old enough to legally work.

Responding to youth is complex because the actions on any single institution cannot be effective in isolation. So, effective treatment of mental health and learning disabilities depends not ONLY on the schools but also on the families and the youth themselves. What currently happens is that institutions respond to needs and concerns in a somewhat siloed manner – focusing on their area of jurisdiction.

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